

Colonial Islamophobia in the Texts of the Algerianist Writer Louis Bertrand

الإسلاموفوبيا الإستعمارية في نص الكاتب الجزائري لويس برتراند

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Abstract:

The present paper explores the issue Islamophobia which dominates the current political and social arena from a new perspective. Islamophobia in fact is not a product of current circumstances. Its origins go back to the earliest conflicts between Christians and Muslims during the Crusades and later during the colonial campaigns. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between Islamophobia and colonialism in the oeuvre of Louis Bertrand. It analyzes the functioning of Bertrand's discourse on Islam and Muslims in the colonial space of Algeria. Moreover, it shows how Islamophobia constitutes an elemental pillar of the colonial ideology that dominated the French Colonial Literature of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. For this reason, the study draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and his assumptions about the representation of Muslims in his *Covering Islam*.

Keywords: Colonial Islamophobia, colonial ideology, Louis Bertrand, French Colonial Literature.

ملخص البحث

إن الإسلاموفوبيا التي تهيمن على الساحة السياسية والاجتماعية الراهنة ليست وليدة للظروف الحالية؛ إذ تعود أصولها إلى أولى الصراعات بين المسيحيين والمسلمين خلال الحروب الصليبية، ولاحقا خلال الحملات الاستعمارية. تبحث هذه الورقة في العلاقة بين الإسلاموفوبيا والاستعمار في كتابات لويس برتراند. من خلال تحليل خطاب برتراند حول الإسلام والمسلمين في الجزائر كمستعمرة فرنسية، يتبين لنا كيف تشكل الإسلاموفوبيا ركيزة أساسية للإيديولوجية الاستعمارية التي هيمنت على الأدب الاستعماري الفرنسي في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر وأوائل

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القرن العشرين. وللقيام بذلك، تستند الدراسة إلى فرضيات إدوارد سعيد حول الاستشراق وطريقة تصوير المسلمين في كتابه *تغطية الإسلام*.

كلمات مفتاحية: الإسلاموفوبيا الاستعمارية، الأيديولوجيا الاستعمارية، لويس برتراند، الادب الاستعماري الفرنسي.



1-Introduction :

The main objective of the present study is to explore the issue of Colonial Islamophobia which has not received enough attention. The study takes the Algerianist writer Louis Bertrand (1866-1941) and some of his texts (*La Cina* 1901, *Le Sens de l'ennemi* 1917, *Jean Perbal* 1925, *Devant l'Islam* 1926, *Histoire d'Espagne* 1932, *Sur les routes du sud* 1936) as a case study since his colonial islamophobic sense is scattered over different works rather than one specific text. It aims to shed light on the functioning of religion in the French colonial context and the feelings of hate and fear that it generated. The importance of this study resides in continuous relevance in recent times since islamophobia is still reigning in our world.

Louis Bertrand's texts exhibit a high xenophobic sense which he calls "le sens de l'ennemi" and "le sens de ce qui n'est pas moi." (1925: 119) He is a writer whose fear and hate for everything "different" from his identity whether national, religious, or cultural gave shape to his ideological orientations and fictional as well as nonfictional writing. His early colonial contact with the German invader in his Lorraine and later with the Muslim in Algeria heavily contributed in the construction of his xenophobic personality. In one of his autobiographical writings, he explains the reason behind his feelings saying: "en ma qualité d'homme de la frontière - et la frontière la plus menacée en France - j'avais, plus que les autres Français, le sens de l'ennemi." [As a frontier man, the most threatened frontier in France, I believe in the sense of the enemy more than other French people.] Therefore, Bertrand regards people of disparate belonging as enemies and as a symbol of threat against the French integrality.

More specifically, Bertrand shows particular sentiments of animosity and disdain for Muslims. An anti-Muslim rhetoric features his texts about Algeria wherein a range of negative images and stereotypes about the colonized Muslim are perpetuated. His misrepresentations synchronously reflect the writer's colonial ideology and anti-Muslim creed. Against this

background, the present paper locates Bertrand's narratives within the discourses of "Colonial Islamophobia." It addresses the ways in which this compound ideological construction functions in the author's writing and how it gives it its shape. Therefore, the concept of "Colonial Islamophobia" is first defined and then related to Edward Said's "Orientalism" in an attempt to delve into the interplay between the colonial and Islamophobic ideologies.

2- Colonial Islamophobia:

Islamophobia, as the word literally indicates, is the phobic attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. Generally, it represents an extreme fear, hate, and disdain of Islam and everything related to this religion. Despite its modern manifestation in what is recently called the "Terrorist Muslim", it was an elemental part of the European far history. As Tomaž Mastnak explains, "The ideological complex we now refer to as Islamophobia is rooted in far older traditions of hostility toward Muslims. These traditions have, over a span of centuries, shaped Latin Christianity and European identity in fundamental ways." (2010: 30) Islamophobia, accordingly, is an old story of Christian European animosity towards Islam. Such hate is still dictating the ways in which the European sees the Muslim and behave with him. The Muslim represents for him a source of danger, skepticism, and hate. Islamophobia constitutes a discriminatory creed which results in unreasonable postures and practices towards Muslims like the New Zealand mosque attack in 2019.

The Runnymede Trust Commission, a forerunner in Islamophobia studies, defines the term as an "unfounded hostility towards Islam." (1997: 04) It delineates that Islamophobia "refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs." (Ibid) The practical consequences The Runnymede Trust mentions manifest in the people's perceptions of, statements about, and behavior with Muslims, their beliefs, their symbols, and their figures. Islamophobes identify Muslims in a denigrating manner and therefore alienate them from the course of civilization. They consider Islam as a stagnating doctrine which does not allow people to adopt the new civilized ways of living.

Naser Meer, in his study of Islamophobia towards Muslims living in Europe, defines the term in a way that echoes The Runnymede Trust's. He maintains that,

L'islamophobie inclut la suspicion, le dégoût ou la haine d'individus—
ou du groupe - musulmans, considérant leur « musulmanité » réelle ou

supposée comme un trait négatif. Elle renvoie donc à une logique raciale, et non pas simplement théologique, et peut prendre plusieurs formes, à travers des attitudes, des comportements, des discours et des images. (2019: 11)

[Islamophobia includes suspicion, disgust or hatred of Muslims - individuals or groups-, viewing *their* real or perceived "Muslimanity" as a negative trait. It thus refers to a racial logic, and not simply to a theological one, and it can take many forms, through attitudes, behaviors, speeches and images.].

Accordingly, Islamophobia is a phenomenon in which the Muslim is reified into an object of suspicion and antipathy which are reflected in different discursive forms. Meer also emphasizes the racist aspect of the Islamophobic ideology relating it to the field of cultural racism wherein people are excluded on the basis of their cultural belongings. Such practices are noticed in preventing Muslim woman wearing *Hijab* from entering public spheres like universities for example.

Aside from The Runnynede Trust's and Meer's horizontal definitions that are based on one group's rejection of another "different" group epitomized in the Muslim, Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez provides a more profound conception in which the vertical relationship between the Islamophobe and Islam is stressed. Putting it in a frame of power and dominance, Bayrakli and Hafez see that,

It is about a dominant group of people aspiring to seize, stabilize and widen their power by means of defining a scapegoat –real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources, rights and definition of a constructed 'we.' Islamophobia operates by constructing a static 'Muslim' identity, which is attributed in negative terms and is generalized for a whole group of Muslims, often placed in opposition to ruling governments. [...] Islamophobia, as a form of racialized governmentality, aims at undermining power- critical Muslim identity that especially questions the assumptions of a Western epistemological hegemony that is shared by Muslim elites. (2019: 01-02)

As the quote shows, the writers understand Islamophobia in the context of power discourses where the dominant "we," in an attempt to perpetuate and enhance its power, constructs the Muslim as "Other" onto which generalized reductionist traits are projected. Thereby, the Muslim is confined to a position of inferiority and subjection, and his threat towards the "we" is regulated.

Bayrakli and Hafez's perception of Islamophobia recalls colonial discourse and its functioning. The two notions have various common points

and they follow the same logic of power hierarchy in which the dominant/dominated Binarism is the basis for identity construction of both sides. In both cases, the more powerful is trying to enhance his status and keep the less powerful in a position of permanent subordination and subservience. Due to the similarity between the two discourses, they can go hand in hand and nurture each other in the context of colonialism in Muslim lands. Therefore, the concept “Colonial Islamophobia” is valid.

“Colonial Islamophobia” can be identified as the ways in which the colonizer tries to impose his rule over the colonized Muslim through portraying him as a permanent threat to the colonial system and as a culturally and racially backward in a need for the colonizer’s control. In the discourse of Colonial Islamophobia, Islam is redeemed the main cause of the inferiority of the colonized. Islam is equated with violence, obscurity, fanaticism, and irrationality. The intricate interplay between Islamophobia and colonialism stems from the fact that the latter is in essence a Christian construction. In this regard Andrew Shryock argues that,

the elaboration of a fundamentally hostile Latin Christian attitude toward Muslims was an outcome of the deep internal crisis of the Western Christian world in the eleventh century. This crisis in Europe led to the Crusades and to an assemblage of anti-Muslim sensibilities that has survived for centuries. (2010: 12)

From Shryock’s words, it is obvious that colonialism of modern times is a continuity of an old Christian antagonism towards Islam and this is exactly what Bertrand calls for in his works. He regards the French Colonization of Algeria as a continuity of the previous Latino-Christian civilization in the area which it was interrupted by the Muslims who constitutes a jeopardy of this continuity. Colonialism in his view represents the Crusades in a new shape. Thus, the study of Colonial Islamophobia shows more about the centrality of religion in power relations of the modern world.

3- Islam/Muslim through colonial eyes:

Colonial Islamophobia and Orientalism are similar systems of representation which center around the classification and the description of “Other” groups. Though Edward Said does not mention Islamophobia as a concept in his writings, he speaks of “a remarkable tradition in the West of enmity toward Islam,” (1980: 26) and which he describes as “Orientalist.” (1981: 04) The subject is addressed in his *Covering Islam* which is considered by the critic as complementary to his book *Orientalism*. He attests that “Orientalism carries within it the stamp of a problematic European attitude towards Islam, and it is this acutely sensitive aspect of Orientalism around

which my interest in this study turns.” (1979: 74) According to Said’s words, it can be concluded that Colonial Islamophobia can be anchored in the Orientalist studies regarding Islam a part of the Orient.

Many critics interested in the field of Islamophobia corroborate the view that most stereotypes associated with Islam and Muslims are developed from Orientalist discourses and the evolvement of Islamophobic thought is related to European colonialism. (Kumar, 2012: 42, Maira, 2011: 111) This study adopts the same stance and appropriates Said’s theory to fit the analysis of colonial Islamophobia. On this basis, Said’s definition of Orientalism can be applied to the concept which can be defined as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between [Islam] and ‘the Occident.’” (1979: 04) Accordingly, the Muslim in a colonial space is identified in opposition to the European colonizer who represents rationality, progress, and civilization.

For the European Islamophobe, the Muslim is always seen with negativity. He is a representative of a hereditary violence for which he is feared and an irreparable backwardness for which he is underestimated. As Said states, Islam “come[s] to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic hordes of hated barbarians.” (1979: 59) The image of the hostile and barbaric warrior has persisted in the European *imaginaire*. Moreover, it has been believed that the Islamic cult followers are characterized by a limited intellect and indolence. “The Arabs and Islam,” Said confirms, “represent viciousness, veniality, degenerate vice, lechery, and stupidity in popular and scholarly discourse.” (1980: 26) Such degenerate traits make of the Muslim an object of disdain and hate.

4-Bertrand’s vision toward Muslims:

As an Islamophobe, Bertrand’s anxieties at the French colonial continuity in Algeria whose local population are Muslims brings to the surface his feelings of dread of and contempt for them. An overt expression of such sentiments dominates his writings in which he perpetuates a range of misrepresentations emphasizing the Muslims’ “Otherness.”

For Bertrand, the Muslim is constructed as an eternal enemy who represents a constant threat to Christianity and its enterprises like the French Empire. Conveying his opinion, Bertrand declares: “Dès le lendemain de mon arrivée, je sentis en lui [l’indigène algérien] l’ennemi – un ennemi qui n’a rien oublié, rien pardonné, et qui désarmé pas.” (1936: 72) Accordingly, the writer emphasizes the point that the Algerian as all Muslims has never overcome his old conflicts towards the Christian colonizing power and has never ceased his war against it. In saying so, the author warns against

indifference to the Muslim or minimization of the danger he can pose as he shows his residual fear of Islam.

Bertrand's stance towards Islam reinforces Said's claim that Islam is a "lasting trauma" for all Europeans (1979: 59) and "that Islam outstripped and outshone Rome cannot have been absent from the mind of any European past or present." (Ibid: 74) With regard to the influence of the history of the Latin Roman Empire who was a symbol of Christian power on Bertrand's thoughts and ideologies, one can see the link between his fears of Islam and his aspirations of rebuilding the lost grandiose of Roman Empire in the Algerian and North African territories which was destroyed by Muslims. Bertrand seems afraid that the French colonial projects in Algeria fail because of the Algerian Muslims. An extract from his *La Cina* confirms his feelings,

Vous savez qu'en ce moment, tout l'Islam s'agite, des grandes Indes à l'Hinterland algérien. Des confréries fanatiques parcourent les oasis en prêchant contre nous la guerre sainte. Ici même la propagande s'exerce sous nos yeux. Le danger est imminent. Les Algériens ne tarderont pas à s'en rendre compte. (1901: 262-263)

By these words, the author shows how religion plays a vital role in the Algerian colonial space where the Islamic cult can fuel people to rise against the French rule and throw it.

For Bertrand, the Muslim is an agent of fear because of two main reasons which are malice and violence. The writer suspects the Muslim's deeds and intentions believing that he is malicious. Despite the appearance of being tamed and regulated, he prepares for the day when he rebels against his colonizer. In *Devant l'Islam*, Bertrand expresses this view saying,

Les musulmans aiment à se proclamer les plus hospitaliers du monde. Nous verrons tout à l'heure dans quel sens il faut entendre cette hospitalité qui n'a rien de fraternel. Mais, elle est toujours précaire et provisoire et ne prend un aspect de duré que sous la pression de circonstances indépendantes de leur violence. (1926: 22)

The manifest fraternity and hospitality of the Muslim is, for the writer, a mask under which he hides his true feelings of repressed hatred that waits for the right moment to surface. Then he questions whether the Muslim can be let free in an attempt to reinforce his stance,

Ne pouvons-nous laisser les musulmans tranquilles ? Qu'ils bâtissent à leur guise des mosquées et des méderasas : cela ne nous regard pas, sauf le jour où ces mosquées et ces méderasas deviendront des centres d'agitation anti-française. (Ibid: 199)

The quote shows the extent to which Bertrand is suspicious of Islam and its symbols. For him, Muslims should not be given the freedom to build religious centers which will be employed as centers for rebellion against the French colonization.

Another aspect that is associated with Islam is an inherent violence which makes the Muslim aggressive. His religious fatalism supports violence through the idea of martyrdom and *jihad* (Said, 1981: 107), the thing which enhances his ferocity that frightens Europeans. With such a conviction, Bertrand portrays Muslims as bloodthirsty, brutal, and revengeful yearning for wars. He gives the example of the Muslim conquest in Andalusia where they committed terrible massacre (1932: 195) and the example of the Arab establishment in North Africa by means of cruel deportation. (1922: 129)

Influenced by Cardinal Lavigerie, Bertrand considers Muslims as extremist and intolerant towards other religious groups mainly Christians. He believes that they reject diversity and force others to convert to their own religion. He sees that "l'islam ne peut admettre que lui. Pour l'infidèle, pas d'autre alternative que la conversion ou la mort. S'il est toléré, - et même quelque fois, pendant assez longtemps, - ce n'est jamais qu'à titre précaire." [Islam can admit only itself. For the infidel, he has no alternative but conversion or death. If he is tolerated -even sometimes for a long time, it is precarious.]. (1926: 91-92) In view of this, Bertrand equates Muslims with fanaticism which compels them not to accept others and not to tolerate them. Even in case some tolerance is shown, it is a pretense under which deep hate is hidden.

Such traits as violence, obscurity, fatalism, and fanaticism with which the Muslim colonized is associated can pose a major threat to the colonial hegemony in any colony with the Muslim population. With these characteristics, the Muslim population of any colony become a challenging power to the colonizing one. On this basis, Bertrand shows his anxiety over Islam whose latent power can arise at any moment if it has not been restricted and thereby it will defeat the French.

The Muslim is not only feared, he is also detested and despised. The same reasons why the colonizer is afraid of the colonized are among the main reasons that evoke the former's sentiments of hate. The previously stated characteristics of fear are related to inferiority and backwardness in the European logic. Bertrand as an islamophobe believes that Islam, in Said's words, "shielded from true development by an archaic set of superstitions, prevented by its strange priests and scribes from moving out of the Middle Ages into the modern world." (1981: 28) In other words, Algerians and all

other Muslims are considered as degenerate people who could not develop since the Middle Ages. (1917: 12) Their old traditions of violence and religious intolerance remain the same despite the flow of time and the development of the whole world.

Moreover, the Muslim is depicted as intellectually and scientifically stagnant. For the writer, his limited intellect prevents him from producing or inventing anything of his own and relying on his enemy's productions. His superstitious religion keeps him within the confines of sterile philosophy of life and keeps him within a constant ignorance and backwardness. (1926: 91-92) Therefore, he had lived in misery and poverty before the coming of the French colonizer who provided them with the simplest necessities for a normal human life. By claiming the unchangeable spirit of the Muslim, Bertrand is trying to show the continual need of the colonized Muslim for the Christian civilization brought by the French.

Muslims are also underestimated in the texts of Bertrand because of their indolence. The Bertrandian Arab is an unqualified lazy who fades in front of the French and cannot be competitors for him. He submissively chooses to be on the margins of modern life. The Muslim Algerians are represented as dull people who incline towards jobs which require no learning, intelligence, or special skills. Their trades are limited to what requires physical strength like water carriers, polishers, commissionaires, or maneuvers and porters. Furthermore, even when they get a job, they escape work. In *La Cina*, Bertrand gives the example of the Arab workers of Emille Schirrer who repeatedly find various excuses to let their work the reason why they are fired. Schirrer is convinced as the writer that the Arab Muslim will never change his traits.

Because of the lassitude of the Muslims of Algeria, their lands were let uncultivated and barren. The lands were let to be covered by weeds till the arrival of the French who turned it into wide estates and gardens. The Algerian Ben Kouider expresses his wonder at the French's ability to turn arid lands into vast gardens. He says to Mr. Schirrer exclaiming "vous avez là une jolie propriété ! quand je pense que j'ai vu tout ça en *friche*... des champs où il ne poussait que des *épinés* !" (1901: 409) Ben Kouider's exclamation is a clear admission that the Muslim population had done nothing for their lands in contrast to the vigorous French colonizer.

5- Conclusion:

In the oeuvre of Louis Bertrand, the anxiety over the continuity of the French colonial hegemony in Algeria is intensified by the fact that the

colonized population are Muslims who are both feared and hated. The writer's texts are stereotypical narratives in which conventional colonial discourse overlaps with the ideology of Islamophobia. The image of the Muslim enemy is constructed in a negative way since his barbaric traits and latent threaten the security of the colonizer and his expansionist agenda. The Muslim is seen by the writer as a savage who must be tamed and a backward who needs to be refined. By his discursive misrepresentation, Bertrand tries to vindicate the French colonization and atrocities against the Algerian Muslims. Therefore, it can be said that Bertrand's texts belong to the ideologies of Colonial Islamophobia.

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